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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000492

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [KISL](#) [KWMN](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: HEJAZIS UPSET BY FATWA ABUSE IN ONGOING ISLAMIC
THEOLOGICAL BATTLE

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana C. Gfoeller for Reasons 1.4 (b) a
nd (d).

¶1. (C) BEGIN SUMMARY: Dr. Izzat Atiyya of al-Azhar University's Hadith Department issued a polemical fatwa last May arguing that women and men could work together provided that they become family members through breastfeeding. This is one of several fatwas that the Islamic establishment has issued recently, causing embarrassment and anger to a number of Muslims in the Hejaz. Several Hejazis spoke out against this fatwa and against others of comparable absurdity, including those originating from Saudi Islamic authorities. Attiya's fatwa has incited much discussion among Jeddawis of the ongoing debate between traditional and contemporary interpretations of Islam, and the decline in the credibility of Islamic institutions. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) The head of Egypt's al-Azhar University's Hadith Department (widely respected and listened to in the Hejaz), Dr. Izzat Atiyya, recently issued a controversial fatwa concerning breastfeeding. The fatwa stated that a woman who is required to work in private with a man who is not a member of her immediate family - a situation forbidden by Islamic law - can resolve this conflict by breastfeeding the man, thereby making him a member of her family. Hejazis - traditionally the more open to polemics of the Saudis - were quick to react. Some interpreted it as a legitimate means to circumvent gender segregation in the workplace, an increasingly hot topic in the Western Province, and others - specifically some female Jeddawi entrepreneurs - as a complete joke.

Fatwa Embarrasses and Angers Hejazis

¶3. (C) The breastfeeding fatwa has angered many Hejazis. Some Hejazis called-in to Cairo talk shows to criticize the edict. A Hejazi doctor stated: "I am a physician working in Saudi Arabia. Most of my Muslim colleagues are just ordinary medical blokes (and we all work with women medics at all hours) and are all terribly embarrassed by this clown and his fatwa." A Saudi blog read often by Jeddawis warned against further risk of "global mockery."

¶4. (C) This is not the first time that a Sheikh has issued a fatwa that has roiled Post's Hejazi contacts. Last spring, al-Azhar University issued a fatwa stating that "drinking the urine of the Prophet Muhammad was deemed a blessing." A number of our contacts reacted with embarrassment; others became defensive, accusing the Western press of trying to humiliate Muslim believers by "playing up" this story. By contrast, in 2001, Saudi Arabia's Higher Committee for Scientific Research and Islamic Law issued a fatwa that banned Pokeman (a Japanese cartoon character) because it "promoted gambling and was a front for Israel." Several

Jeddawis said that people simply ignored it.

15. (C) When the Consul General discussed the topic with a highly-cultured, IDB official, he expressed utter disgust by the fatwa, stating: "We Muslims never miss a chance to shoot ourselves in the foot. This is a lot worse than the Muhammad cartoons but we were the ones making ourselves look ridiculous this time, not the Danes." However, he hastened to assure the CG that canonically, the fatwa is correct. He referred to a hadith in which a friend of Muhammad's asks his advice on how he could spend the night with a woman to whom he is not related, without sinning. In the story, the woman is breastfeeding a child and her house is on his way as he sets out for a pious trip. Muhammad responds that he should drink of her milk so that they will become like mother and son, which would preclude them from having intimate relations. The IDB official added with some embarrassment: "Of course this would be impractical in modern, large offices where large numbers of men and women work together, but according to the Koran, this fatwa is the only way to go."

Jeddawis Lament Corrupt Fatwa Industry

16. (C) As no central authority controls Islamic doctrine, there exists a lot of debate among Jeddawis over traditional and contemporary interpretations of Islam. This is most apparent in the issuance and retraction of bizarre fatwas such as Atiyya's. A number of our contacts bemoan that, despite calls for reform of the "fatwa industry" (a term coined by Islamic scholar Sheikh Abdullah bin Beih), change has been absent. Most recently, many Jeddawis cited as further proof for the need to reform, the November issuance

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by two members of the Saudi Council of Ulemas, a fatwa deeming camel beauty pageants "evil" and "a violation of Islam."

17. (C) A number of forward-looking Jeddawis complain that as Arab governments have co-opted religious institutions as a means to maintain legitimacy, such institutions have lost credibility and independence. They point out that Saudi Arabia in particular has ample leverage over al-Azhar University. The SAG provides the faculty with sabbaticals to the Kingdom as well as stipends for "services rendered to Islam." Saudi Arabia benefits greatly from such influence, as was the case in 1990 when it asked the University to issue a fatwa permitting the presence of non-Muslim troops to protect it against the Iraqi government. Yet the SAG has remained silent on the latest controversies. It seems that, as often happens, Hejazi intellectuals are eager to come to grips with the more controversial aspects of contemporary Islam.

GFOELLER